

Lunch goes private ✓

Chartwells to run school program

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School officials are hoping a private company can help them close the budget gap in their school lunch program.

The School Committee voted 4-1 to enter into negotiations with Chartwells to privatize the school food service at their meeting Wednesday night.

Superintendent Susan Skeiber gave a powerpoint summation of the lunch program's financial woes over the years.

Starting in 2007, the pro-

gram incurred a loss that had to be covered from the school's operating budget. By fiscal year 2009, the loss was \$116,382.47.

"One of the contributing factors was the change in the healthcare to the town," said Skeiber.

The school district tried to make up the deficit in several ways. An assistant manager position was cut, and staff hours were reduced by one half-hour (excepting employees who only worked three

continued on page 14

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continued from page one

hours a day.)

Those actions saved the district \$135,000, said Skeiber, however there was still a projected budget shortfall of \$135,000 for fiscal year 2010.

The reduction of hours also engendered some controversy because it caused many of the workers to lose their health benefits. Some of the cafeteria workers resigned because of this situation, Skeiber said.

The district also negotiated with the unions to restore the half-hour and the benefits, but with a lower cost health care plan. That move saved \$50-80,000.

During all this, the district put out a request for proposal to see if there was any interest in a private firm running the food service. Three companies responded, and a subcommittee recommended the Duxbury schools go with Chartwells if they were to privatize.

Skeiber said Chartwells offered a number of different things in their pitch to the district.

Under Chartwells, the average meal price would stay about the same but the company believes it can increase participation by 6 percent.

The company also has resources the school district lacks in terms of pursuing reimbursements, and because Chartwells is so large, they can save money on food costs by buying in bulk. Simply put, Skeiber said, the company would have higher operating costs but more profit, and would be able to not only make up the budget deficit but bring revenue to the school. They would also make an initial investment of \$100,000 in the school's facilities and would offer a \$1,000 scholarship.

"Everybody is struggling with the human aspect of this, but when you're struggling with deficits ... that's difficult to continue to do," said Skeiber, who recommended the committee move forward with privatization.

Committee member Maureen Connolly said the greater issue of health insurance for all town employees has to be examined.

"The real issue here is the health insurance," she said. "This year it's hitting cafeteria workers, next year is it going to be the janitors ... I just don't think this is the way we want to be treating our long term employees."

Resident Jim Sullivan said he thought the committee was making a hasty decision.

"As a citizen I have a right to know what's going on with the numbers ... not 10 minutes before a vote gets taken," he said.

He asked why the School Committee has not pressed the town for more answers on why the cafeteria workers' benefits come out of the lunch revenue, rather than the town's general fund.

"Why has the selective treatment been allowed to occur?" he asked.

Theresa Lesko, who has worked in the cafeteria for 11 years, said that she didn't want to see the schools privatize with a company affiliated with fast food.

"Be prepared, Duxbury parents, to hire a personal trainer," she said. "Tonight I'm asking the school committee to reconsider this decision for the sake of the children."

When it came time to vote, School Committee member Gary Magnuson made an amendment asking that Chartwells consider the current food service employees first when filling positions, and that the company make every effort to improve the nutritional quality of the food. The amendment passed 4-1, with Connolly dissenting.

The second vote, to authorize the schools to negotiate a food service contract with Chartwells, also passed 4-1, with Connolly voting no.

"We've known for a long time we cannot sustain the level of cost increases ... and still provide the level of staffing we have now," said School Committee Chairwoman Anne Ward. "There's no mystery there."